

Mordechai Vanunu - the world's first nuclear hostage

Campaign to Free Vanunu and for a Nuclear Free Middle East

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Statement by Daniel Ellsberg March 22, 2005

[Statement by Daniel Ellsberg on the recent indictment of Mordechai Vanunu in Israel for his violation of restrictions banning him from speaking to foreigners or giving interviews to foreign journalists. Ellsberg has just returned from Israel, where he had been invited to testify against these restrictions on March 16 before a committee of the Knesset; the committee hearing was cancelled, evidently in secret anticipation of this indictment. Ellsberg is available for a limited number of interviews on this subject, through the Institute for Public Accuracy.]

The fact that Israel has a large and growing nuclear arsenal-larger than Britain's-has been recognized by the rest of the world ever since Mordechai Vanunu revealed it conclusively nineteen years ago. For demolishing his country's policy of concealment, denial and "ambiguity" of its status as a nuclear weapons state, Vanunu served eighteen years in prison, including an unprecedented period of eleven and a half years of solitary confinement in a six-by-nine foot cell.

Meanwhile, not one of the harms that some feared might result from his revelations has materialized in the slightest degree. The notion that any further details he could disclose, nineteen years later, could harm Israel's national security is absurd. Why then, after he has served his full sentence, is the democratic state of Israel invoking British Mandate Emergency Regulations of 1945, pre-dating its own independence, to threaten him with prison for exercising his fundamental human rights to speak to foreigners and foreign journalists? Why do its leaders still insist on suppressing any open discussion in Israel itself of its real military posture and its implications for their security?

Here's one possible answer. This very month both Israel and the US are making open threats of armed attacks as early as this summer on Iran's nuclear weapons potential. For Israel to confirm openly Vanunu's revelations at this particular time-dramatically abandoning forty years of obfuscation--would attract unfavorable attention to the fact that such threats or attacks against Iran are aimed not at achieving a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East but at prolonging, indefinitely, Israel's monopoly of nuclear weapons in the region. That is an unstated aim for both the US and Israel, but a less than compelling justification for preventive war. There may lie a reason-but not a legitimate one--for returning Mordechai Vanunu to silence in solitary.

What the world needs of this prophet of the nuclear era is not his silence but his freedom to speak and travel, to inspire others to follow his example of truth-telling in their own countries, including ours.

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